

## Civil War Book Review

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### Bonds Of Union: Religion, Race, And Politics In A Civil War Borderland

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## Review

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**Ford, Bridget** *Bonds of Union: Religion, Race, and Politics in a Civil War Borderland*. University of North Carolina Press, \$45.00 ISBN 9781469626222

### Religious Difference and the Making of Unionism before the Civil War

In *Bonds of Union: Religion, Race, and Politics in a Civil War Borderland*, Bridget Ford argues that Civil War-era Americans living in Ohio and Kentucky forged communal ties through urbanization that were strong enough to survive one another, secession, and war. In a somewhat odd bit of whipsaw analysis, Ford stresses the ironic tensions between Protestants and Catholics, blacks and whites, and nationalists and sectionalists as the social and cultural glue holding Kentuckians in Louisville and Ohioans in Cincinnati together during the crushing challenges of civil war. *Bonds of Union* demonstrates that urban Americans along the Ohio River shared a common language regarding race, devotional religion, and the importance of preserving the American Republic; which in turn strengthened their commitment to the Union war effort. Paradoxically, Ford believes that the same social strains that caused deep, bitter resentments in the years before the war gave Americans in these two river cities the language, capacity, and will to unite to save the Union. Bridget Ford's themes are often jarring when juxtaposed together, but she surprises readers on purpose to move a complex, nuanced argument forward. Well-researched and fairly clear, Ford's book is an interesting addition to the emerging field of border region studies in the Civil War Era.

As Ford sees things, antebellum clashes between native-born Protestants and immigrant Catholics created a new devotional energy that strengthened attachment to the Union in the years before the Civil War. For instance, she argues that "the arrival of thousands of European Catholics, especially from Germany, to the cities of the Ohio River valley in the 1840s and 1850s led to an entirely distinctive religious history, where immigrants and native-born Protestants both sought out 'bonds of union' among believers and with Christ

through intense devotional zeal – much of it imported by Catholic religious orders – not seen elsewhere in the United States” (xii). This development was important in Ford’s view because in borrowing from one another’s devotional playbook, both groups forged a common attachment to the Union that made their free pursuit of the heavenly kingdom possible. The role of the border region itself in forging these bonds is intriguing because Americans living here occupied a sort of liminal space where ideological purity was impossible, even for the most rabidly sectarian.

Similarly, in perhaps the most innovative section of her book, Ford explores the way that race and racial concerns both exacerbated bigotry while also energizing anti-slavery sentiment along the border. In somewhat overwrought prose, but apt analysis, she rightly argues that in antebellum America “the thorns of race hatred and the blooms of human equality grew together, as if mutually dependent, with sharp points violently protecting the fragile new growth of democracy among all white men, whether rich or poor” (89). Ford is certainly not the first scholar to argue that throughout the antebellum era black chattel slavery was a vital bulwark propping up American political and social equality; and until the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery was ratified on December 6th, 1865 the federal constitution’s claim to speak for “We the People” really meant “We the People” (who are white).

Yet her claim that the border cities’ context forced pro-slavery and anti-slavery Americans to see the human costs of one another’s position is innovative and new. It will not shock readers to learn that race (and religious) riots exploded across Louisville and Cincinnati in the 1840s and 1850s, but they may be surprised to learn that a counter-weight to reactionary violence also emerged as well. Black and white preachers, polemicists, and social reformers challenged racial stereotypes in Louisville, Cincinnati, and the surrounding countryside through sermons, pamphlets, and moral essays and novels. Free black businessmen, clergy, and educators in both of these cities further undermined racial stereotypes by demonstrating the possibility of a sober, moderate, black bourgeoisie. Although white Kentuckians and Ohioans clung to colonization through almost the end of the Civil War as a desperate answer to the supposed impossibility of racial peace after freedom, many also embraced abolition as the last, best hope of preserving the Union.

Finally, Ford also believes the geographic, political, and cultural context of the river cities themselves cast nationalism in stark relief to the scary specter of

sectionalism. The advent of war brought its horrors to those on the border, who bore the costs of the wider nation's failure to compromise. Ford shows that relief efforts organized out of Cincinnati and Louisville forged strong ties that transcended section, race, and religion. "Through these relationships," she stresses, "civilian agents insisted they made war humane. Violence and civility, in their minds, fused a kind of transcendent union that ennobled rather than cast doubt on patriotism" (275). This is notable because both the costs of fighting and caring for those injured or maimed welded Americans along the border together in simple, direct ways that they often struggled to comprehend and understand. In similar fashion, newspaper partisans found a new faith in Unionism strengthened by the experience of war.

Thus, although polemicists like Louisville's George Prentice often demagogued anti-Catholic and anti-black prejudice, while casting doubt on the probity and prudence of anything more than cold neutrality in regards to the sectional crisis in their newspapers before Confederates fired on Ft. Sumter, Prentice's Louisville Journal reflected a starker mood afterwards. "In editorials, Prentice wrote of secession 'as a dead body [that] sinks in the sea,' and viewed neutrality as a 'quiescent' bodily state akin to a disabling paralysis. By contrast, Union loyalty he conceived, not surprisingly, as vital and pulsing with life" (252). This is a crucial shift because it demonstrates the harder line that most Kentuckians would take to defend the Union if pushed, as they were once Braxton Bragg invaded the commonwealth in 1862. The context of the border itself again looms large in this development, as Kentuckians chose to defend the Union and helped doom the Confederacy in the process.

*Bonds of Union* has a few warts. The push-pull nature of Ford's analysis may prove jarring and disconcerting to some readers. She begins each of her sections with a chapter demonstrating all the ways Americans living in Louisville or Cincinnati disagreed on race, religion, or the cause of union. She then follows with further chapters exploring the ways the process of disagreeing forged new conceptual possibilities for Union and unionism. It is a sophisticated, subtle argument that mostly works, but there are moments where the analysis drifts towards near-contradiction. Further, this book would be strengthened by stressing the role of the border context more. To be fair, Ford is at her best when she shows how living together made people from different racial or religious backgrounds get along in ways that they did not overtly desire or completely comprehend. Yet she should stress this point even more forcefully than she already does in the text. Ford has the evidence to support this conclusion but

does not always emphasize it enough.

Those quibbles aside, Bridget Ford has written an interesting, innovative book. *Bonds of Union* is part of an emerging field of scholarship on the border region during the Civil War, and Ford should be commended for her intellectual agility and imaginative analysis. Readers will also find her prose usually clear and mercifully free of the jargon and tortured, pretentious verbiage that mars too many books in the field. Readers looking for context and understanding on how and why Kentucky and Ohio forged a commitment to the Union in the light of competing, contradictory contexts on the ground should read Ford's book.

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